Population and Progress

POST-INDUSTRIALISM. By Arthur J. Penty. The Macmillan Company.
THE SOCIAL TREND. By Edward A. Ross. The Century Company.
SOCIALISM AND CHARACTER. By Henry Sturt. E. P. Dutton & Co.

IN Erewhon, that almost inhumanly rational Utopia of Samuel Butler, they had disposed once and for all of one of the major social problems; they had completely done away with machinery. Not a piece of it was allowed in the country, save one or two that reposed harmlessly under glass in museums, mementos of the final struggle of man to save himself from the slavery of mechanism.

It is a curious paradox of modern times that what was expected to liberate the race has in many ways bound it; that labor saving inventions have frequently meant harder and more monotonous labor; that the era of industrialism, which Herbert Spencer thought would gradually make war impossible, has produced the greatest and most destructive of all wars.

Doubts of the complete goodness of machine production are not new. They came almost with the coming of the machine as it is known to-day. Carlyle in "Past and Present" thundered indignantly against a system under which Lancashire factory workers faced starvation—because they had produced too many shirts! Morris prophesied that machine industry might mean the decay of art. Mary Shelley, in a story that has become a byword, dramatized its possibilities for evil.

The too great manufacture of useful goods that troubled Carlyle was called overproduction. The new processes turned out a supply faster than the market called for it. Consequently factories shut down and workers went without employment. It is the fear of such an eventuality to-day that causes trades unions, and manufacturers as well, to restrict their output. They are afraid to work too well.

This quantity production made possible by the machine is cited by Mr. Penty as evidence of the peril that lies in the unrestricted use of mechanical devices. If there is a single fact that mainly accounts for the present plight of the world it is this: In the fifteen years before the war Germany quadrupled her output of goods. She had four times as much to sell. She demanded markets. She challenged England on the seas. She challenged France in Africa. She challenged both in the Near East. She feverishly built Bagdad railways and fleets—with a result that is only too tragically obvious. With a thoroughness unequaled by any other nation, Germany went in for machine production. The result was overproduction, a race for colonies and markets, war.

As Mr. Penty sees it, there is no branch of art that is not threatened by mechanical production. "The great cultures of the past were organically a part of a man's everyday work. They came to a man at his work and formed in his mind a temper that responded to the higher forms of culture." But when the twenty men making a pin, eulogized by Adam Smith, is the ideal in industrial art, then a minute and deadening subdivision of labor takes place. Soon few single workmen make anything; they make only parts of things. This they do over and over until whatever artistic instincts they have are atrophied.

Mr. Penty's remedy is a return to the medieval system of craft guilds, where creative work was personal and quality counted more than quantity. This he takes to be not inconsistent with the use of machinery for the rougher tasks, but it is incompatible with the subdivision of labor that exists to-day. Just how much machinery should be retained, how its use in manufacture is to be restricted, he does not say. "If we are firm in our belief that the creative impulse is natural to man we are in possession of a principle that would guide us. . . . Any one of aesthetic sensibility with any practical experience of craft production would know instinctively where the line should be drawn." We should, however, require only a small part of the machinery we now use. The benefits conferred by it have ceased, and our recent increased capacity for production has meant only increased competitive waste.

Mr. G. K. Chesterton informs us in a preface that Mr. Penty "is one of the two or three truly original minds of the modern world." His essay is suggestive, though it hardly bears out Mr. Chesterton's claims as to his originality. He has stated the case against machinery with force. Perhaps, if Mr. Chesterton is right, he may later specify more definitely the principle on which machine production ought to be curbed. Agree as one does with much of what he says as to the social consequences of machine industry, the precise way out is after all of some importance. And Mr. Penty here does not get to a consideration of it.

Prof. Ross's book is a collection of not wholly connected essays treating of the present tendencies in a society that is largely the product of machine industry and the rapid movement of population that followed its introduction.

Prof. Ross is apprehensive of the migration of people from lands of excessive fecundity and sees the possibility of the most terrific of wars being fought over this issue. The danger lies not in race suicide, so-called, but in the too high birth rate of the less educated. One reason he gives for restricting immigration is that for more than two decades the frontier in America has virtually not existed. The result of the growth of cities and the lack of new resources to draw upon has been rising prices. In the eighteen years following 1896 the retail cost of the fifteen principal articles of food rose 70 per cent. Despite the increase in the productivity of labor, there was an actual fall in real wages—wages measured in goods. The chief cause was the exhaustion of arable land and the immense immigration. Since the frontier called the discontented and oppressed in the past, now that it is gone these restless spirits will stay in the cities and become leaders of an insurgent working class.

Among the suggestions put forth by Prof. Ross is one that he advanced several years ago, a "dismissal wage." He would have employers compelled to pay employees on dismissal the equivalent of a fortnight's wages. He would apply the rule only to those who had been working six months or more and would safeguard it against abuse. He believes such a plan would stabilize employment, reduce the labor turnover and bring about economy in production.

Mr. Sturt, who is lecturer in the University of Wales, does not take Mr. Penty's view of the effects of machine industry. He looks forward to a day, under socialism, when the machine may go on and do all it can toward overproduction. Not being dependent upon markets, the more we produced the greater would be the wealth of the nation and the leisure of the worker. He holds the common opinion that, properly managed, machine industry should prove a liberating institution.

The book is a somewhat vague and abstract exposition of socialism as he sees it. He does not differentiate between the various types of socialist thought, guild, state, &c. Though the old saying about the unchangeability of human nature is, of course, disproved by even the little that science now knows of the past, one wonders how many centuries it would require for human nature to become so thoroughly benign and unselfish as he pictures it under socialism.

Mr. Sturt seems a bit naive. Discussing the population question, he merely expresses his faith that the socialist state will properly regulate the birth rate, that "it will be the business of English statisticians to say what number of children are wanted each year to renew the population in each class of workers." Then the State will limit the births to that number—or presumably raise them if necessary—apparently by moral suasion. After a plea for freedom of thought and liberalism in education he observes: "It is doubtful whether any educational establishments ought to be tolerated which are under sectarian control." So you see freedom of thought is not simple even under socialism.

My Adventures in Politics

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which he inclosed should grace the political news column of THE SUN.

"And what have you done with this ruinous blast?" I asked Mr. Riggs.

"Well," he answered, "I am conventional. Mr. Dana, you know, feeds to the office cat letters which do not interest him. Me? I dropped Uncle Joe's secretary's letter into the waste basket."

This is a good place to relate, out of sequence, how Mr. Cannon, unknowingly revenged himself on me. Unknowingly and unwittingly, too, for, because of one of those mysterious human impulses, the venerable ex-Speaker seemed to like me. One day in the House the chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of which I was a member sent word to me to come at once to the committee rooms which were in the House wing of the Capitol. As I rose to respond to the message a page brought the cards of some people in the gallery who wanted me to join them there. Ordering the page to tell the people that I was then engaged, but would see them later, I started to cross the "well," as the open space in front of the Speaker's rostrum is called; but Uncle Joe, crossing in the opposite direction, threw one arm over my shoulder and began thus: "Did it ever occur to you in looking over these men, these Members, sitting there, how infinitely smaller than an atom is man in the universal scheme of things?"

I assured the philosopher that no such naughty thought had ever rippled the surface of my mind, and I wriggled a little by way of intimating that if he would drop his arm I would be on my way. But his thin, wiry arm coiled the more closely as he continued: "The universe, my boy! Read Poe's thesis on the First Cause. Irresistible power performing unimaginable acts of wonder and grandeur; creating systems after countless systems of worlds beyond the ken of mightiest telescopes; unnumbered clusters of immeasurable systems each vaster in extent and glory than the unbridled imagining of astronomers. In the presence of the thought of systems of stars and suns away beyond the blackness unsearched, unsearchable by man's magnified view, in the presence of such thoughts, I say, what in the devil does that excited little mite speaking up there by the middle aisle think he is accomplishing?"

I knew what my friends in the gallery were thinking of me, as they watched me loitering, as they supposed, for a gossip with a friend. I'd have a job trying to explain to them. "Hal Flood has sent for me to go to the Foreign Affairs Committee," I gasped to Uncle Joe.

"Foreign Affairs, you say?" Uncle Joe sneered. "Foreign to what, to whom? There is a thought to ponder. Little as we are, inconsequential below any measurable degree, we are of the leaven, not foreign, of all created things; all the works of the First Cause. Aye, even that mortal talking by the middle aisle belongs. He belongs! Presumptuous man! We scheme, contrive, seek ambitious ends, yet we are but motes whirling aimlessly, invisible in aught but glaring light; incapable of comprehending even our own littleness, our futility."

Thus he held me, and held me even when he released his arm—he had to, to gesture—he still held me, for in a burst of absolute poetry, to which my recollection does but little justice, he pictured, as he visioned it, the magnitude of the universe. I knew that I was by that time but a poor thing in the opinion of my gallery friends—whose minds were probably on dinner—so I listened in the content of despair. But what a time I had explaining to them!

Can it be possible—it comes to me with a shock—that Uncle Joe, wise as he was in such incidents, had chanced to observe the two messengers, caught the whole situation, and purposely played that trick upon me?

[This is the thirteenth of a series of articles by Mr. Townsend. The next will appear in an early issue.]